

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Overview

The *No Child Left Behind Act of 2001* added a new reading initiative to the *Elementary and Secondary Education Act*—the Early Reading First program. It addresses the concern that many children enter kindergarten without the necessary literacy foundation to enable them to succeed in school. In fall 2009, the United States Department of Education awarded an Early Reading First grant to the Montana Office of Public Instruction (OPI) to implement the *Montana Partnership for Early Literacy* (MTPEL). OPI planned on implementing MTPEL in 23 classrooms, located in five sites throughout Montana, from January 2010 through May 2012. MTPEL has four goals:

1. All participating children will graduate with high achievement levels in language, phonological awareness, alphabet knowledge, print awareness, and classroom skills necessary to participate effectively in elementary school and to become proficient at reading.
2. All classrooms will contain the materials (instructional, play) and spatial arrangements (e.g., centers) that will support the development of children's language and early literacy skills.
3. All teachers will achieve high levels of instructional proficiency with research-based practices through timely, targeted, sustained, and intensive professional development on children's acquisition and use of language, phonological awareness, alphabet knowledge, and print awareness. Teachers' instructional proficiencies are applied both to (1) children making satisfactory progress, and (2) children for whom progress monitoring identifies the need for intervention in a Response to Intervention (RTI) process.
4. All children and families will transition successfully into K-3 programs aligned with scientifically based reading research (SBRR).

To attain these goals, MTPEL combines two SBRR programs—*Opening the World of Learning* (OWL) and *Language for Learning* (LFL). These two curriculums form the core reading program (Tier I) in which all children participate. Based on a RTI model, children not performing at anticipated levels receive additional supports in Tier II or Tier III.

The RTI model is supported by the administration, analysis, interpretation, and use of data from a variety of screening, progress monitoring, and outcome assessments including the *Peabody Picture Vocabulary Test 4* (PPVT), *Test of Preschool Early Language* (TOPEL), *Phonological Awareness Literacy Screening* (PALS), *Get It Got It Go!*, and *Get Ready to Read*. Additional data on the classroom environment and instruction are gathered from the administration of the *Early Language and Literacy Classroom Observation* (ELLCO) and the *Classroom Assessment Scoring System* (CLASS).

In conjunction with a comprehensive educational program in the classroom, additional programming is available to increase MTPEL children's preparedness for kindergarten and reading. Family and community members are invited to participate in parent workshops and Countdown to Kindergarten. These programs are aimed at improving parents' ability to communicate with their children and build language, building community connections, and introducing families to the elementary school and kindergarten teachers. MTPEL also works with the local education agencies (LEAs) to ensure alignment exists between the preschool and kindergarten curriculums.

Attention is also focused on improving the English language acquisition of MTPEL's English language learners (ELLs) who are primarily members of an American Indian tribe and attend school in an area on or near an American Indian reservation. In addition to participating in instruction in a culturally responsive classroom, MTPEL staff members are trained in *Structured English Immersion*, a program that incorporates principles of *Specifically Designed Academic Instruction in English*. A second population targeted in the grant is special needs children; implementation of the RTI model addresses this focus.

An array of professional development opportunities, including summer and winter Institutes, site-based training, coaching, professional learning communities, undergraduate/graduate coursework, portfolio development, and workshops are provided to MTPEL teachers, coaches, center directors, teacher assistants (TAs), parents, and kindergarten teachers in elementary schools where MTPEL graduates enroll.

In December 2009, OPI contracted with Education Northwest to provide a comprehensive evaluation of MTPEL. The evaluation addresses the extent to which implementation of its Early Reading First grant enabled it to meet its goals. The evaluation relies on a mix of methodologies to answer the evaluation questions. These include the analysis of child assessment and classroom observation data, classroom observations, the administration of surveys and staff member interviews, and document review.

Participation

From fall 2009, and continuing through August 2010, at least 53 teachers, TAs, coaches, and center directors participated in MTPEL, across five sites and 22 classrooms. These center staff members interacted with at least 399 children enrolled in MTPEL classrooms from January thru June 2010. The majority of these children will attend kindergarten in fall 2010 (61%) and were American Indian (55%); 15 percent¹ received special education services. Four-fifths of the children (n=318) were identified as participating continuously from January through May (as evidenced by having winter and spring test scores).

To What Extent Did MTPEL Accomplish Its Goals?

The following summarizes achievements in grant implementation. While training began in fall 2009, classroom implementation occurred during the five-month period from January thru May 2010. Additional training was provided in August 2010.

MTPEL used Early Reading First funding to support staffing, professional development/training, and materials.

The project brought five employees on board—A Project Director who oversees all aspects of the grant; two Early Reading First Specialists who provide professional development and technical assistance to all teachers, TAs, coaches, and center directors both off- and on-site; a Data Coordinator who is responsible for overseeing the team that administers the child assessments and classroom observation protocols and returning the data to pertinent project personnel; and a Family Coordinator who is responsible for

¹ This number is significantly different from what was originally expected (37%) and is likely a data collection error. MTPEL staff members and center coaches will focus on collecting an accurate accounting of children receiving special education services during the 2010–2011 preschool year.

implementing the family literacy and kindergarten transition plans. Assisting these five staff members are hired consultants who also provide professional development and technical assistance.

In addition to these staff members and consultants, six center coaches work with teachers and TAs in their classrooms and their center director. Center coaches support staff members by providing coaching, modeling and training on the new curriculums; ordering, organizing, and supplying curricular materials; administering, analyzing, and using assessment data; and meeting with teachers (individually and in groups) to share information, provide feedback, and review and plan lessons.

MTPEL provided the professional development content it anticipated, and that content was considered “helpful,” “very helpful,” or “extremely helpful” to recipients.

Beginning in fall 2009, and continuing through August 2010, MTPEL offered a variety of professional development opportunities to its teachers, TAs, coaches, center directors, and assessment team members. These included training on the classroom observation protocols (ELLCO and CLASS), the child assessments (PALS, PPVT, and TOPEL), and the curriculums (OWL and LFL). These topics, and others, were addressed off- and on-site. Overall, the content-area training MTPEL anticipated providing was provided. Training was well received by participants who usually found the formats and content at least “helpful,” and sometimes “very helpful” or “extremely helpful.”

MTPEL participants attended professional development that would allow them to attain the high levels of instructional proficiency required for children to effectively participate in elementary school and become proficient in reading.

Teachers, coaches, and center directors received a total of 200 hours of off-site professional development that included a winter and summer Institute. In addition, on-site professional development covering the same content, and that was provided through coaching from center coaches, Early Reading First Specialists, and hired consultants was estimated to total 140 hours. Research has found that effective professional development is delivered in the form of institutes and when the content provided therein is supported afterwards (Yoon, Duncan, Lee, Scarloss and Shapely, 2007). Finally, they found that professional development of at least 14 hours in duration is more effective than a lesser amount of professional development.

Families were not supported to assist their children to effectively participate in elementary school.

During the first year of grant implementation families were not supported to assist their children to effectively participate in elementary school, beyond how they were supported prior to implementation of the grant. The grant structures expected to address this—the family literacy and kindergarten transition plans—were not addressed with families during 2009–2010. However, planning at the state and center levels did occur during the summer of 2010. The Family Coordinator was working on the kindergarten transition plan and was gearing up to begin visiting area elementary schools in the fall. In addition to beginning to implement Countdown to Kindergarten, the Family Literacy and Culture toolkits were being designed. All of the sites had been visited, and interviews were conducted to ascertain the types of family and community involvement and kindergarten transition activities that were already occurring. Finally, the family components of the grant were discussed at the May training and at the Summer Institute; so professional development in this area has already started to be provided.

Teachers are on their way to achieving high levels of instructional proficiency with research-based practices and classrooms are on their way to containing the materials (instructional, play) and spatial arrangements (e.g., centers) that will support the development of children’s language and early literacy skills.

MTPEL identified six standards of effective teaching practice. These standards address both instruction and the classroom environment and were used as one means to address the extent to which MTPEL achieved this goal. Analyses of ELLCO and CLASS observation data show that:

- Teachers are establishing rich and engaging physical learning environments. Analyses found that the ELLCO Classroom Structure score increased from 14.4 to 16.2 (range from 4 to 20).
- Teachers are supporting children’s abilities to attend to instruction, persist with difficult tasks, cooperate with peers and adults, and use language to solve problems. Analyses found that the CLASS Emotional Support score increased from 5.0 to 5.2 (range of 1 to 7); the CLASS Classroom Organization score decreased from 4.4 to 4.2 (range from 1 to 7).
- Teachers are supporting the development of young children’s language and early literacy skills throughout the day, using intentional, playful, and engaging instruction. The ELLCO Language Environment score increased from 10.3 to 12.2 (range from 4 to 20), the Books and Book Reading score increased significantly from 14.9 to 18.9 (range from 5 to 25), and the Print and Early Writing score increased from 7.6 to 8.7 (range from 3 to 15).
- Teachers are supporting the development of young children’s higher order thinking skills and understanding of the world and the way things work. The CLASS Instructional Support score increased significantly from 2.8 to 3.5 (range from 1 to 7).
- Teachers are creating environments and differentiated instructional opportunities that meet the needs of diverse learners. The ELLCO Curriculum score increased significantly from 8.1 to 10.7 (range from 3 to 15) and the CLASS Instructional Support score increased significantly from 2.8 to 3.5 (range for 1 to 7).

The sixth standard—teachers use information and data from a variety of sources to understand children’s instructional needs and to improve teaching and learning for young children—was evaluated using interview data from center coaches. They reported that while teachers did not receive a lot of professional development or resources for using data, many have begun to do so. They are using data from assessments (PALS and PPVT) and from LFL. Some teachers are administering assessments and some are familiarizing themselves with data reports. Others are using assessment data to group children and inform their instruction.

Additional measures of growth in teachers’ knowledge and skills will be assessed and results will be included in the 2010–2011 evaluation report. This year, the Teacher Knowledge Survey was administered in the winter, but a second administration did not occur in spring. The survey will be administered in spring 2011 and changes in knowledge will be assessed at that time.

What we do know from baseline scores is that staff members are confident in their ability to support the preschool children in their classrooms and have a high enthusiasm for learning. However, they lack some of the knowledge and skills to teach the children many of the prerequisites that will allow them to be successful in kindergarten and beyond.

Overall, respondents correctly answered about two-thirds of the items on Part One of the Teacher Knowledge Survey. Staff members were most knowledgeable in the area of reading and they were fairly knowledgeable in the areas of working with ELLs, incorporating the families and cultures of the children in their classrooms, language and vocabulary development, emergent writing, and differentiating instruction. Some of the skills endorsed by the National Early Literacy Panel (NELP, 2008) as being predictive of later literacy skills (e.g. letter knowledge and phonological awareness) were areas in which respondents answered fewer questions correctly. Staff members were least knowledgeable in the topic of letter knowledge.

Analyses of Part Two of the Teacher Knowledge Survey showed that about two-thirds or more staff members reported confidence in their ability to help, motivate, and support the children in their classroom in regard to early language, literacy, and writing. However, they were less confident in their ability to *teach* them about recognizing letter sounds, rhymes, and alphabet letters and early writing skills. While two-thirds of center staff members felt they had enough understanding of language concepts, knowledge, and skills to support children in early reading, writing, and language, just over half disagreed that they taught early reading and writing skills as well as other skills, or that they could track their children's skill developments in these areas. Most participants were highly enthusiastic about learning and improving their practices to better serve the children in their care.

Teachers' instructional proficiencies are being applied both to children making satisfactory progress, and children for whom progress monitoring identifies the need for intervention in a RTI process, to a limited extent.

During the first year of grant implementation, the RTI process intended to address this goal was not fully implemented; this is anticipated in the 2010–2011 school year. During 2009–2010, Tier I instruction, the first tier in the RTI process, was implemented, as all children received instruction in the core curriculums. Still, achievement gap analyses indicate that the achievement gap in the percentage of American Indian and white children scoring in the average range on the PPVT was closed by five points (13% gap reduced to an 8% gap). These analyses also indicated that the achievement gap in the percentage of children receiving and not receiving special education services, scoring in the average range on the PPVT, was closed by four points (28% gap reduced to a 24% gap).

Many participating children graduated with high achievement levels in language, phonological awareness, alphabet knowledge, print awareness, and classroom skills necessary to participate effectively in elementary school and to become proficient at reading.

According to analyses of PPVT, PALS, and TOPEL child assessment data, the majority of children age-eligible to attend kindergarten in fall 2010 were scoring in the average range in regard to receptive language (85%), expressive language (89%), phonological awareness (64%), print knowledge (67%), upper-case letter recognition (57%), knowledge of letter sounds (55%) and name writing ability (71%). Finally, teachers reported that the majority of these children made moderate to substantial growth in listening comprehension skills (75%).

Children age-eligible to attend kindergarten in fall 2011, had more variable progress. While the majority of these children were scoring in the average range in regard to receptive language (78%), expressive language (76%), print knowledge (62%), and phonological awareness (59%), fewer were doing so in regard to upper-case letter recognition (22%), knowledge of letter sounds (21%) and name writing ability (36%). Finally, teachers reported that the majority of these children made moderate to substantial growth in listening comprehension skills (62%).

It is unknown if the children and families who participated in MTPEL in the 2009–2010 school year transitioned successfully into K-3 programs aligned with SBRR.

During the first year of grant implementation the kindergarten transition plan and Countdown to Kindergarten were not addressed with parents. However, planning at the state and center levels did occur during the summer of 2010. The Family Coordinator was working on the kindergarten transition plan and was gearing up to begin visiting area elementary schools in the fall. All of the sites had been visited and interviews were conducted to ascertain the kindergarten transition activities that were already occurring. Finally, the family components of the grant were discussed at the May training and at the Summer Institute; so professional development in this area has already started to be provided.

